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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3892
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3751
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4458
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4367
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RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000172

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S LINGUISTIC SPACE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Turkmen language is more widely spoken than might otherwise be appreciated by Russian-speaking foreigners. Most citizens of Turkmenistan have facility in both Russian and Turkmen, and only the margins are monolingual, with maybe 10 percent speaking only Russian. Niyazov pursued a deleterious policy of linguistic nationalism that pushed out Russian-only professionals in the health care and law enforcement fields, among others. Berdimuhamedov has continued these unwritten rules, but simultaneously permits Russian to be taught in schools, albeit as a "foreign" language. Turkmen have a natural affection for their national language, and fluency in Turkmen could open more avenues for interacting with the population.
END SUMMARY.

THE LANGUAGE FROZEN IN TIME

¶2. (C) The modern Turkmen language is spoken by several million people, concentrated in Turkmenistan, but also spread in significant numbers into Iran and Afghanistan. There are a number of dialects/regional variations which are associated with the different Turkmen tribes. Usually, "Turkmen" language refers to the Teke dialect (spoken in the area around Ashgabat). All Turkmen dialects are closely related to modern Turkish and Azeri, and are, to a certain extent, mutually intelligible with these languages. Even though the Soviets had a policy of Russian language education for all, Turkmen was never in danger of vanishing. After independence, Turkmenistan's first president institutionalized a peculiar form of linguistic nationalism, seeking to reify the national identity of the Turkmen people.

This policy, however, has eroded the level of education in the country and the current president is slowly correcting course, while still maintaining some of the more deleterious aspects of the policy.

¶3. (C) The language on the street is predominately Turkmen. An unscientific survey of bazaar vendors in Ashgabat

indicates that the vast majority have significant fluency in both Turkmen and Russian. A very small minority only speak one or the other. Russian-only speakers tend to be non-Turkmen by ethnicity (Russian and Armenian figure especially prominently) and Turkmen-only speakers tend to be from the villages, rather than Ashgabat. The Consular Section estimates that of our Turkmenistan citizen applicants, about 80% speak both languages, at least passably, with the remaining 20% evenly split with fluency in either Russian or Turkmen. Turkmen citizens who only speak Russian are almost certainly Russian, Armenian or another non-Turkmen ethnicity. Outside of Ashgabat, Turkmen becomes far more prevalent, and fluency in Russian drops off precipitously. Native Russian speakers have commented that President Berdimuhamedov's Russian is heavily accented, implying that he uses Turkmen at home and as a matter of routine, pulling out Russian only when necessary.

¶4. (C) Turkish citizens, depending on how charitable they feel, note that Turkmen either sounds like a corruption of Turkish, or, to quote one Turkish diplomat, "Like the language someone's grandparents from a remote village would use. It's sort of charming in a way." Under the Soviet era, it largely stagnated, and lacks words for newer technology. Turkmen linguists tend to borrow from Arabic and Turkish for official terms, but the populace will freely substitute Russian if no common Turkmen word exists. One example is for digital photo: officially, it is "sanly gurnushly elektron surat" (electronic picture of the type with digits), but commonly used is the Russian "tsifrovoy." One highly-educated FSN notes that often the official language

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used in newspapers and on television will go over the heads of Turkmen who have not been that well educated. This FSN also admits that sometimes the news presenters will break out a new word that she doesn't understand, taking it from old Turkish, Arabic or, in some cases, Farsi.

LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM AT ITS FINEST...

¶5. (C) The first president of Turkmenistan, Niyazov, promoted the Turkmen language to the detriment of all others. It went so far that lack of Turkmen fluency was seen as unpatriotic and got many Soviet-trained professionals fired from their jobs. Most notably, medical personnel, who were highly-trained by the Soviet system, were removed from their positions because they did not speak Turkmen. This loss is acutely felt in the vastly deteriorated quality of health care. Rumors indicate that the 29th City Hospital in Moscow is nicknamed the "Ashgabadinskaya Bolnitsa" (Ashgabat Hospital) because of the large number of Turkmen doctors who got jobs there after being removed from their positions here.

Additionally, the Consular section often sees applicants engaged in private enterprise or real estate who were trained as doctors, nurses and other health-sector workers. Their reason for such a significant, and abrupt, change of vocation? They were removed from their jobs because they did not speak enough Turkmen to pass muster under Niyazov's Turkmen-Language Only Golden Age. This linguistic discrimination still persists. Turkmen fluency is still a requirement (even if unwritten) for a government job in the health care field, and military or police officers who are not Turkmen by ethnicity, and therefore are unlikely to speak Turkmen well, find their prospects for advancement severely limited.

TURKMEN IS THE MOTHER TONGUE, RUSSIAN IS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

¶6. (C) Interestingly, Berdimuhamedov has quietly reinstated teaching basic Russian in all schools (starting with the first levels of primary school), along side English, but both as foreign languages. This does not, however, deny the primary place of the Turkmen language in the country. Legally, Turkmen is the national language, at least according to the 1991 law on language. When passed, this law included

provisions for how to transition from Russian to Turkmen, including a timetable directing various ministries how to phase in Turkmen. This timetable was implemented haphazardly, at best, but Turkmen is now widespread and nearly all civil documents are written in Turkmen (sometimes with English translation for the headings).

¶17. (C) There are approximately three Russian-medium schools in Ashgabat, and competition to get in is fierce. It is somewhat easier for non-Turkmen (or mixed) ethnicity students (since they aren't really considered "Turkmen"), but there is a preference even among Turkmen citizens for Russian school instruction. One Turkmen employee of an international organization initially enrolled his child in a Turkmen school, but since the child was not challenged, moved over to a Russian school. Conversely, a Turkmen employee of the World Bank, who had been posted to the UK just prior to returning to work in the Turkmenistan office, enrolled his teenage daughter in a Turkmen-language school intentionally so she is able to speak the national language, and therefore have more employment opportunities. He and his wife both speak only limited Turkmen, having heard it only from their parents. The young woman speaks English and Russian fluently, and studied Spanish while in the UK. While she understands her parents' decision, she is decidedly unhappy about being enrolled in a school where the instruction is in a language of limited use outside the country. Further, there is no "Turkmen as a Second Language" program to help bring her up to speed.

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¶18. (C) Interestingly, we have noticed a trend of ethnic Turkmen Turkish-educated visa applicants who speak only the most rudimentary Russian. However, these applicants often have decent English in addition to Turkish and Turkmen. Often, these visa applicants are the product of Gulenist-affiliated Turkmen-Turkish Schools in Turkmenistan. They also tend to gravitate towards careers that involve technology, even if it is only selling equipment. (NOTE: This tracks with the Gulen movement's focus on technology education. NOTE.)

WHEN IN TURKMENISTAN...

¶19. (C) COMMENT: Even Turkmen trained under the Soviet system exhibit a natural affection for their national language. Most complaints about Turkmen-medium schools stem from the weak curriculum, rather than the fact that the language of instruction is Turkmen. However, a certain linguistic conundrum persists: recognizing that Turkmen has stagnated and that not everyone speaks it, the GOTX allows Russian use to continue while simultaneously relegating it to second-class status, even if it means the loss of highly-trained doctors, police and others.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: For the near term, diplomats can get away with speaking Russian. The MFA has not yet insisted on receiving diplomatic notes in Turkmen, although most that we receive are written in the language. In the long term, however, American diplomats will benefit from learning Turkmen: there is obvious national pride associated with the language, and upcoming generations have less and less facility with Russian. Likewise, if we are to truly get insight into the goings on in the regions, Turkmen language will be essential as Russian never really penetrated the villages. END COMMENT.

CURRAN